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BYZANTINE ENAMELS¹

FEW collections are now more difficult to form than those adequately representative of Byzantine enamelling. The best work of this kind is for the most part preserved in churches and their treasures—at Venice, at Limburg, at Munich, in Mingrelia; few museums possess series which can be described as comprehensive. . . . In no collection is it possible to study better [than in the Pierpont Morgan Collection] the achievement of this extraordinary art as it flourished between the tenth and thirteenth centuries; or better to realize the exuberance and ease of mastery which enables it now to appropriate the spirit of the great designs upon the walls of Byzantine churches, now to fabricate medallions so diminutive that we almost need a magnifying glass to appreciate their merit.

The reputation of Byzantine enamel does not depend upon a single quality; but perhaps its most signal distinction lies in its ambitious use of the cloisonné method to render human personality. This is its true differentia; it is really this that we remember first when we wish to recall its salient features. So bold a pretence as this, of characterizing men in pulverized glass and soldered metal strips, could succeed only upon certain well-defined conditions; it required at once complete mastery of technique and perfect consciousness of limitations. For the large resources of painted enamel are denied to the process which works with cells; it cannot attempt fluency or intricate composition; success must come by renunciations which at first might seem impossible. Yet undoubtedly these enamellers did succeed, if only because they renounced with full comprehension of loss and gain. The secret probably lies in their absorption in the general spirit of Byzantine art, which was most often grave and sedate, idealistic, and governed by serene convention. Imbued with this spirit, they preferred the subjects in which

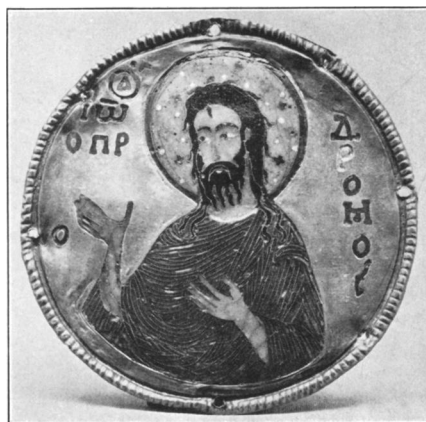
it was most manifest, religious subjects, and they treated them according to the best tradition of their time with the economy, the restraint, and much of the high dignity of greater art. Now the cloisonné method, to which they almost exclusively adhered, has a certain natural congruity with the Byzantine spirit; its adoption was thus, in a way, predestined. . . . This method is not adapted to swiftly creative work; it is too close to jewellery and to all the minute and elaborated concerns which that patient craft implies. But, like mosaic, it responds to the quiet appeal of ceremonial and religious thought; it renders accepted types of sanctity or devotion with a success unsurpassed by any of its rivals. We are tempted to indulge the fancy that the various processes have each their ethnical affinities, and that the preferences shown by different races are founded upon good reasons of psychology. Arguing so, we should find cloisonné appropriate to the contemplative Byzantine or Chinese nature, and *champlevé* the appointed style of imperative Romans, or the strenuous Mediaeval peoples who succeeded to the Roman estate. Certain it is that the mood of an adventurous stock finds better expression in the latter method, while the former is, perhaps, more equal to subtle problems of design, or to implications of individual temperament. . . . No cloisonné enameller could render the movement and shock of war . . . nor would any Byzantine craftsman have essayed the task. His was a mind attuned to other moods, preferring effects of delicate concordance, and averse from all violences of act or passion. Perhaps it was partly for this reason that the secular pleased him less than the religious subject; he was not so sure of his steps in this field; there underlay it volcanic possibilities alien to the still bent of his imagination.

Byzantine enamelling, then, stands in the first place on its achievement in the province of figure art. But the striking merit of the few purely decorative pieces which remain might almost justify the doubt whether, with all their power of psychological expression, the enamellers

¹Reprinted with permission from *Byzantine Enamels* in Mr. Pierpont Morgan's Collection by O. M. Dalton in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. xxi, pp. 3, 220-224.



THE VIRGIN



SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST



SAINT MATTHEW



SAINT GEORGE

MEDALLIONS, CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL
BYZANTINE, VII-IX CENTURY

might not have better fulfilled their destiny if they had followed the same instinct as the Chinese, and confined their art to ornamental motives. There can be little doubt that the cloisonné method, whether in gold or copper, lends itself most admirably to decorative design. It produces good "heraldic" animals; where a whole field has to be covered with continuous pattern, it is conspicuously successful; there is

Though Byzantine art as a whole was more amenable to change than is supposed, the conservatism of the Byzantine enameller is certainly conspicuous. His types altered but little, his process never, because the first were in harmony with a very stable environment, the second suited these so well that change seemed only vanity. With the champlevé process on copper he was acquainted, but he appears



EARRING
AND PARTS OF A NECKLACE
CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL, BYZANTINE
VII-IX CENTURY



about it a delicacy and a lightness unattainable by the harder champlevé style. The restriction of the colours to ungraduated tones is also a reason for success in ornament; it is the principle of the oriental, the master of splendid pattern. There is, indeed, nothing in cloisonné enamel which tempts the emulation of sculptural or picturesque effects. The enameller on sunk relief (*basse taille*), and the worker in champlevé both yielded in some measure to this temptation, in so far abandoning the oriental ideal with its frank and bright appeal. But the Byzantine remained true to contour and to ungraded hues.

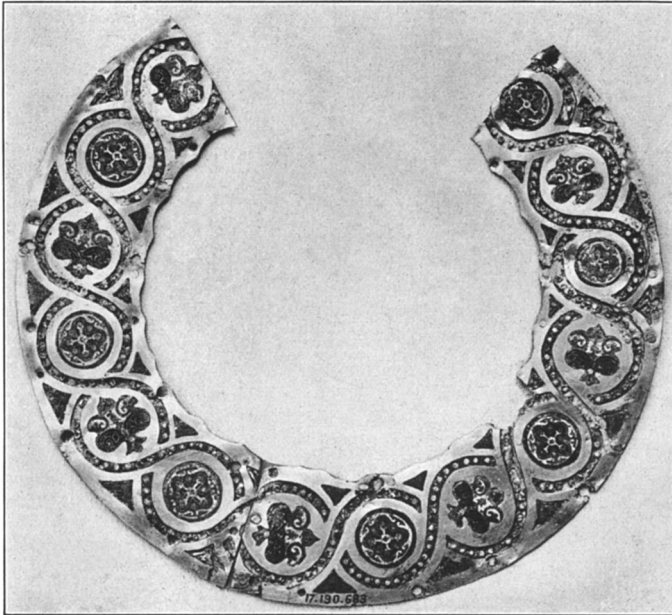
to have rarely used it; the best known instance of its occurrence is the panel with S. Theodore, formerly in the Basilewsky collection, and now in the Hermitage at S. Petersburg. Enamelling upon surfaces in high relief he equally knew; but that also is represented almost alone by the bookcover at Venice with S. Michael, to which allusion has already been made. While his Western contemporaries in Europe were abandoning cloisonné for champlevé, champlevé for *basse taille*, *basse taille* for painted, he remained steadfastly loyal to the first; the latest specimens of his expiring art still follow the technical principles adopted in its youth and con-

sistently maintained throughout its prime. We observe this same immutability, this same aversion from experiment, in all the goldsmith's work of the East-Roman Empire, a characteristic which may be explained by various causes both general and particular. Among the latter may be noted the persistence of a single architectural style, because in old days it was the way of architecture to set the style for the

almost infer the bias of the Byzantine genius, were every monument of its greater art destroyed.

ACCESSIONS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF PRINTS

THE Museum has recently acquired J. Alden Weir's personal collection of his own prints, containing approximately his



HALO FROM AN ICON, BYZANTINE ENAMEL

imitative industrial arts. The use of enamelling in the West was gravely modified by the change from Romanesque to Gothic; in the East the general principles of building and decoration remained more nearly the same, and in so far as they affected the minor arts, they had never been prejudicial to enamel.

Byzantine enamel possesses in an eminent degree [the quality] of resuming in its narrow compass the sentiment of a whole age and culture. As from the study of a single fine Greek intaglio one might half divine the Hellenic spirit, so from one enamelled medallion . . . we might

entire etched work. All forty-eight impressions were printed by the artist himself, and in each case were chosen by him as the best of the pull—Weir, the connoisseur of prints, looking at Weir, the maker of prints, with a cold and critical eye in the process of selection. An ex-President of the National Academy of Design, and long known as one of our most prominent American painters, Mr. Weir has in the past occasionally busied himself with etching, and has succeeded in making of his work in that medium a wholly personal expression. Long a connoisseur and collector of prints, Mr. Weir in his use of the copper plate was able to do what is appar-